

# COVID-19 STRATEGIES & TRENDS > A SPORTS MARKETER'S GUIDE



ACTIVATIVE

---

CREATIVE INTELLIGENCE FUELLING GAME-CHANGING SPORTS MARKETING

---

---

# < UNDERSTANDING THE PAST UNLOCKING THE FUTURE >

We deliver creative intelligence to fuel game-changing sports marketing.

Inspire your teams with the world's most innovative sports brand campaigns, rights-holder marketing, sponsorship activations, technology and trends.

Contact@activative.co.uk

---

Activative 'Creative Reviews' and 'Strategic Briefings' offer category/industry or sports/property creative and strategic intelligence to fuel game changing sports marketing and sponsorship activation.

The objective is always to identify, explore and analyse the key creative strategies, tactics, themes and trends, as well as showcase best practice campaigns and award-winning creative from across the rights-holder, sponsor and sports brand landscape.

Designed to offer insights for everything from pitches to planning, creative ideation and campaign development, our work helps clients stay ahead of the evolving landscape by broadening and deepening knowledge and learning from the world's best work.

We focus on brave, innovative, original work driving/responding to the socio-cultural, economic and tech-led changes across the sports marketing space.

We believe you'll find plenty of ideas, insights and inspiration to help fuel your game-changing sports and sponsorship marketing.

The logo for Activative, featuring the word "ACTIVATIVE" in a tall, thin, black, sans-serif typeface. The letters are widely spaced, giving it a modern and minimalist appearance.

Our analytical creative reviews and strategic briefings are interactive (when online) - just click on the play button arrows to view the illustrative, relevant creative.

We would also be delighted to bring our reviews and briefings to life for your team or clients through an in-person or video live-stream private presentation - just email [contact@activative.co.uk](mailto:contact@activative.co.uk)

## Contents

- P05 > Overview
- P05 > COVID's Sobering Statistics
- P06 > Previous Disaster Response Learnings
- P08 > 9-Step C-19 Strategic Guide
- P14 > Coronavirus Creative Tactics & Cliches
- P15 > What Comes Next?
- P23 > Keep The Faith
  
- P24 > [About Us & Subscribe](#)

**\*Cover image:** In late March, PSG (with the agreement from shirt sponsor Accor and partners Nike, QNB and Ooredoo) produced 1500 special edition jerseys with the brand's usual Live Limiteless logo replaced by the words 'Tous Unis / All Together' and carrying the logo of Assistance Publique – Paris Hospitals (AP-HP). The shirts sold out in 12 hours and raised more than €200,000 for healthcare staff fighting the pandemic in Paris hospitals.

## Overview

**2020 was set to be a blockbuster sporting year crowned by Tokyo Olympics and the first cross-continent UEFA European Championships, but coronavirus shut down live sport in the Spring and reduced the glorious summer sport to speculation and sparsity.**

As well as the tragic human cost, agencies, sports-wear brands, sponsors and rights-holders are scrambling to understand the scale of the virus' savage impact on their business and their fans

The Covid-19 crisis sees sports marketers facing up to an entirely new reality and an unprecedented challenge.

What are the appropriate effective responses to a set of challenges that include:

- How to work with colleagues, clients, partners, talent and fans from home?
- How to understand and adapt to changing fan emotions, needs and locations?
- How to pivot strategies and spend in the short, medium and long term?
- How to stay in business with so little live sport?

This reviews aims to offer some answers to the questions and solutions to the challenges.

## Sobering Statistics

**The scale of the challenge is shown in the statistics as the general advertising sector suffers as clients slash marketing budgets and freeze ad spend.**

According to fintech business lender Finance, 75% of UK businesses report falling revenues and 72% are responding by freezing marketing spend to plug gaps in cash flow.

Ad agencies not only face short term cash flow problems, but longer term revenue challenges and a frightening 85% of UK creative agencies report they will run out of money before June 2020 and 50% are worried they won't get government backed cash.

The picture in the USA is similar with the Interactive

Advertising Bureau reporting that 25% of all brands had completely frozen ad spend by mid March and 75% believing this ad recession will be worse than 2008.

And few sub-sectors of the marketing industry face starker challenges than sport.

A mid-April Two Circles report estimates only 53% of planned sporting events will go ahead in 2020 leaving the global sports industry facing \$62bn revenue drop: generating only \$74bn (down from 2019's \$135bn).

KPMG estimates that as a direct result of the pandemic, total losses for US sports have already reached \$5bn and that Europe's big five football leagues could lose anywhere between €3.5-4bn.

The European Sponsorship Association's (ESA) latest 'Sponsorship Sentiment Tracker' of 150 European sponsorship professionals and thoughts leaders, which aims to provide an up-to-date picture of the health of the sponsorship industry and the impact of COVID-19, found that 39% of rights-holders and agencies are freezing budgets until events return, with 40% furloughing staff and 31% seeking government support.

Plus, the ESA data shows that 75% of brands are looking to extend existing sponsorship rights, whilst 48% are planning to add new assets to fulfil current sponsorship contracts.

While Sponsorship X's recent COVID Impact Study, which surveyed 289 sponsorship marketing professionals from 12 countries to shed some light on the impact of the coronavirus on the sponsorship industry and was published on 24 April, found that 67% expect sponsors to shift their focus and budget to areas of current need (such as COVID relief, food security and mental health).

This following US beer giant Budweiser's diversion of \$5m from its sport and entertainment budget to the American Red Cross before the end of March.

In terms of the estimated overall reduction in sponsorship rights fees investments, revenues or billings expected for the 2020 calendar year there were markedly different forecasts amongst the three main parts of the industry:

- Sponsors -29%
- Rights-Holders -45%
- Agencies -52%

While the average forecast for the decline in sponsorship activation spend among all three groups was -50%.

## C-19 Sports Marketing Numbers

75%  
of US businesses  
say the recession  
worse than 2008

\$62bn  
projected drop  
in 2020 global  
sports revenue

72%  
of UK businesses  
freezing market-  
ing spend

\$5bn  
estimated loss in  
US sports revenue  
already in 2020

50%  
projected fall  
in sponsorship  
activation spend

\$3.5-4bn  
projected loss  
for Europe's big 5  
football league

## Previous Disaster Response Learnings

To seek some solutions to such depressing numbers, Activative looked back through our case study database to identify learnings from previous sports disasters: from racing tragedies, player strikes and athlete scandals, to rights-holder corruption and organiser incompetence and the associated recovery marketing strategies and tactics.

Our team analysed every kind of sports marketing and sponsorship disaster response from a creative and strategic perspective.

The examples ranged from how Nike reacted to a series of athlete scandals over the last decade (including cyclist Lance Armstrong's drugs cheating, para-athlete Oscar Pistorious' murder conviction, golf super star Tiger Woods infidelity and NFL quarterback Michael Vick's dog fighting confession), to how motor sport rights-holders and sponsors reacted to on-track tragedies, plus at sports brand and partner reactions to FIFA's financial corruption (think Skins 'Official Non Sponsor'), to the Rio Olympics' arenas of empty seats (consider the 'Fill The Seats' initiative) and even at how associated brands, sponsors and suppliers have handled player strikes.

Our key takeaways were:

- Actively communicate, don't stay silent
- Be honest and transparent, don't cover up
- Admit and confess, don't blame others
- Think long term, don't over react
- Create a plan, don't be unprepared

Past evidence suggests most sports marketers believe it is better to actively communicate around a disaster (without exploiting it) than to stay silent.

The day after IndyCar driver Dan Wheldon's tragic 2011 accident, his team sponsor GoDaddy set up a sympathies webpage and invited fans to follow the company's CEO and submit their own tributes to the driver which the web designer/host later shared with his family.

Within 48 hours of MotoGP rider Marco Simoncelli's death during the 2011 Malaysian MotoGP, 15 of the 21 sponsors of his San Carlo Honda Gresini Team had posted

Simoncelli tributes on their home pages.

Being open and transparent about a disaster is the marketing rule of thumb and telling the truth is essential if a brand is to survive not just in sport but all categories.

When cyanide-laced Tylenol capsules were linked to several deaths in Chicago in 1982, parent company Johnson & Johnson faced up to the crisis immediately by issuing an immediate national product recall, a free tablet swap, plus regular media updates and was praised.

A 'mea culpa' acceptance of responsibility has also been a popular and honest tactic. Remember the impact of Nike's 2006 black and white confessional spot with the haunting moral voice of his father Earl.

Longer-term strategy is traditionally favoured over short-term reactivism. Nike, for example, is well known for maintaining its long-term commitments in the face of short-term scandals.

While Accenture, AT&T and Gatorade dropped Woods from their sponsorships roster, Nike stayed committed. Similarly, during sexual assault accusations against Kobe Bryant, Coca-Cola, McDonald's and Nutella abandoned their tie-ups while Nike reserved judgement until the outcome of the legal process.

Other sports brands are often less patient or forgiving. When Martina Hingis criticised company merchandise Sergio Tacchini immediately severed its sponsorship and when Michael Vick confessed to holding illegal dog fights Reebok ceased sales of his #7 jersey and Upper Deck ceased sales of his memorabilia.

Our retro research also found when the owner/player dispute led to industrial action shutting down the 2012/13 NHL hockey season brands and sponsors turned to virtual in-game simulations, alternative elite hockey leagues, amateur events and the grassroots game.

One key marketing lesson from that strike was for brands not to take sides with either billionaire owners or millionaire players, but, of course, with the fans.

The overarching learning was that it is vital for all marketers to have a disaster and backlash plan in place providing an attitudinal framework which enables brands to react clearly and swiftly according to previously agreed principles and tactics.

But even if all of these lessons had been learned, and included within one's planning framework, there is little that would or could truly prepare the sports marketer for Covid-19.



Nike 'Tiger & Earl' (2006)

EA Sports / NHL 'Season Simulation (2012-13 Strike Season)'





**FIFA®**



# FIFA, WHO LAUNCH KEY TACTICS TO TACKLE CORONAVIRUS



# 9-Step COVID-19 Strategic Guide

## 1 - Prioritise Employee & Fan Safety

## 2 - Health & Education Public Service Announcements

## 3 - Essential Worker 'Thank You' / Real Hero' Tributes

## 4 - Direct & Indirect Relief Efforts

## 5 - Home Exercise & Physical/Mental Health Utilities

## 6 - 'Long Live Sport' Rallying Cry Spots

## 7 - Fan & Consumer Engagement Initiatives

## 8 - Simulated Seasons, Gaming & eEquivalents

## 9 - Get Ready For The Return Live Sport

# 9 Strategic Steps

The immediate COVID-19 reactions have seen sports marketers respond not just with shock, but also with resolve, resilience and invention.

From rights-holder podcasts and masterclass webinars, to virtual reality press launches and in-game simulated seasons (plus some comic lockdown life competitive commentary from professional sportscasters), there has been no shortage of innovation.

An eight-step pattern emerged with marketers initially promoting the prioritisation of employee/consumer/fan health and wellness, before focusing on changing their practical working methods and then pivoting to a series of reactive and proactive steps focused on practical purpose, direct and indirect action and inspiration rather than on direct sales or the purchasing funnel.

### Activative's 8-Step COVID Response Guide:

- 1 - Prioritise Employee & Fan Safety
- 2 - Health & Education PSA
- 3 - Essential Worker Tributes
- 4 - Direct & Indirect Relief Efforts
- 5 - Home Exercise & Physical/Mental Health Utilities
- 6 - Long Live Sport Spots
- 7 - Fan Engagement Initiatives
- 8 - Simulated Seasons, Gaming & eEquivalents
- 9 - Get Ready For Live Sport

While brands and sponsors are creating campaigns by crowd-sourcing consumer-created clips of people playing sport and exercising at home, rights-holders tend to favour player-sourced material edited into either PSA style advisory and educational messages or entertainment engagement content, leagues are turning to either eSport, gaming and simulated equivalents, while sportswear and apparel brands are favouring practical utilities based around exercise, health and social connectivity running across their social sites and through apps.

### 1: Prioritise Employee & Fan Safety

The primary communication and PR priority was to inform the public about league suspensions, arena closures, game cancellations and store shut-downs with simple, clear and informative messages about the impor-

tance of employee and fan health and safety.

### 2: Health/Education Public Service Announcements

The second step was a wave of initiatives amplifying and echoing the official government and WHO guidelines about how to stay safe with simple stepped guides and athlete ambassador advisories about handwashing, social distancing and staying home.

#### Examples:

[BCCI 'Mask Force'](#)

[FIFA 'Tactics To Tackle Coronavirus'](#)

[NFL 'Stay Home. Stay Strong'](#)

[Team Toronto](#)

[Visa 'Do Your Part Like An Olympian'](#)

### 3: Essential Worker 'Thank You' Tributes

User-generated vignettes of frontline bravery blended with found/archive footage of empty stadiums and sports stars applauding and proclaiming emergency and essential workers as the real heroes were set to emotional 'thank you' voiceovers with tribute copy.

#### Examples:

[Arizona's Major Pro Sports Teams '#ALLAZ'](#)

[European Tour 'I'm Not A Hero'](#)

[FIFA 'We Will Win'](#)

### 4: Direct & Indirect Relief Efforts:

The sports industry rolled out a range of direct and indirect initiatives to fight coronavirus from pledging money and raising funds, to refitting facilities to manufacture PPE, lending stadiums, vehicles, medical staff and equipment to the frontline, plus supporting those shielding in their communities.

For example, as well as running multiple campaigns and initiatives, Nike committed more than \$17m to response efforts and switched shoe manufacturing to make personal protective equipment. Most sportswear brands adopted a similar approach.

Formula 1 teams stepped up to the engineering 'Ventilator Challenge'.

A few of the many examples from football included PSG working with shirt sponsor Accor to auction a limited edition 'All Together' fundraising, FC Barcelona pledging Nou Camp naming rights fees to Covid-19 charities, Chelsea FC handing over Stamford Bridge for medical logistics and offered free stadium hotel rooms to NHS staff,





In response to the coronavirus pandemic and to encourage Spaniards to stay home, Libero magazine decided to give free access to their online archives. To promote this initiative we used stats to show people that "It's Easier to Win at Home", building on Libero's historic tagline: "If they explain it to you with football, you get it".



while Everton FC made Mother's Day Calls' and Manchester United surprised senior citizen season ticket holders with player calls.

Even agencies were active in this area such as sport and entertainment specialist Octagon's 'Athletes For Relief' programme.

### 5: Home Exercise & Physical/Mental Health Utilities

A wave of fitness initiatives launched to help people adapt to a world without outdoor sport or exercise.

There was clearly plenty of demand.

During the first two weeks of the UK's lockdown an Institute for Employment Studies survey showed 60% say the restrictions meant they were exercising less than usual and were seeking practical ways of staying active at home.

While YouTube report searches for home-exercise videos increased 200% in the UK in March (compared to the averages for January and February) and 'Body Coach' turned national PE teacher Joe Wicks broke a Guinness World Record in late March when 955,158 people tuned into his live workout session on YouTube.

During China's coronavirus shutdown activity on Nike's personal training apps rose 80%, so little surprise it was one of several sports brands to make its premium subscription video-based workouts available for free.

But sports marketers have also launched a glut of sophisticated, multi-purpose platforms to meet the physical and mental health needs. These are helpful, practical utilities which meet a need, keep people engaged with the brand at a time when sport is shut down and there are fewer sponsorship activations around and also keeps them connected to their favourite sports stars and passion points.

#### Examples:

Nike 'Play Inside / Move Crew / Living Room Cup'

Adidas 'Home Team'

Intersport 'Work-IN'

Head Tennis 'HEADSTogether'

Sport England 'Join The Movement'

### 6: Long Live Sport Spots

Despite the almost total shut-down of live sports, there was also a glut of one-off emotional videos edited from crowd-sourced home-shot clips celebrating how people across the world are still enjoying sport at home

with inventive, imaginative and fun ways to play and practice.

#### Examples:

Dick's Sporting Goods 'Long Live Sport'

Buffalo Wild Wings 'Sports Lives On'

NBC '#EverydayAthletes'

Team GB/Red Cross 'Isolation Games'

### 7: Engagement Initiatives

With no live sport, ongoing engagement is vital for rights-holders to meet supporter appetite, keep fans connected and provide opportunities and visibility for sponsors.

There has been an impressive range of ideas and initiatives across the sports space from fan, athlete and club-created clips, social and virtual reality offerings, cyber parties, player interviews, club Q&As, games, quizzes, crosswords and plenty of archive footage and classic game repeats.

There have also been no shortage of sports conversations on Instagram Live with stand-out examples ranging from Kevin Pietersen chatting with cricketing superstars and Andy Murray and Novak Djokovic building the perfect player, to Ronaldo Nazario going live with Real Madrid galacticos Beckham, Figo and Carlos.

And its not just fans who need to be engaged, but the media, influencers and partners too.

#### Examples:

QBE 'QBE Swans Story'

Asics 'VR Shoe Launch'

### 8: Simulated Seasons, Gaming & eEquivalents

Some sports which don't need the competitors to physically be in the same place to compete live - such as darts and chess - simply switched to reformatted at-home competitions (eg PDC 'Unibet Darts Home Tour' and the '\$250,000 Magnus Carlsen Invitational').

Other rights-holders teamed up with gaming and virtual partners to complete their seasons and organise their own events from Ironman's Virtual Races to NFL Madden tournaments. The NBA has experimented with both approaches in the form of an 'NBA's 2k Player Tournament' and its 'Horse Challenge'.

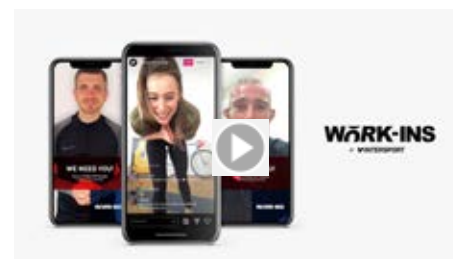
In Spain, La Liga drew audiences of more than 1m for a weekend long charity FIFA 20 Challenge tournament streamed live on both social platforms and by traditional

### BCCI / Indian Govt 'Team Mask Force'



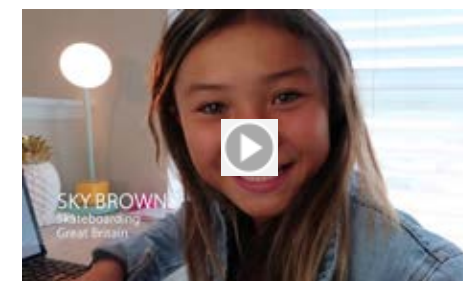
Toronto Teams / City 'Team Toronto'

### Arizona Major League Teams 'ALLAZ'



Intersport 'Work-Ins'

### NFL / NFLPA 'Stay Home Stay Strong'



Visa / IOC 'Do Your Part Like An Olympian'

### Adidas 'Home Team'



Sport England 'Join The Movement'



**IF YOU EVER DREAMED OF PLAYING  
FOR MILLIONS AROUND THE WORLD,  
NOW IS YOUR CHANCE.**

Play inside, play for the world.



Nike 'Play Inside, Play For The World' (Social Post)



Nike 'Play Inside, Play For The World - You Can't Stop Us' (Film)

Nike 'The Living Room Cup' (Instagram Ambassador/Viewer Competitions)



Nike 'Move Crew' (YouTube Missions For Kids)



broadcasters in Spain.

While in the UK, the Virtual Grand National (run by Inspired Entertainment, Carm Productions and StreamA-MG) generated 4.8mn viewers on ITV and also raised £2.6m for the NHS through virtual betting.

When it comes to eSport equivalents and simulated in-game matches and seasons, the secret of success seems to be to go all in.

Follow the example of the auto racing sector (eg Nascar, IndyCar, Formula 1, Formula E and Australia's Supercars) and give these new eRaces the same 360-degree treatment as the real-world events they have replaced as well as embrace digital novelty. Marketers should ensure authentic sports stars compete (as well as expert gamers, fans and celebrities), and sell the whole show from pre-race practice, post-race analysis, plus interviews and highlights as well as promoting and broadcasting the actual race.

Working with Codemasters' Official F1 2019 PC video game, the virtual Grand Prix series fills replaced the cancelled F1 schedule and races have not only featured F1 drivers, but also gamers and celebrities like Ben Stokes, Sir Chris Hoy and Liam Payne.

One of the first to pivot was the eNASCAR iRacing Pro Invitational Series which clocked up 903,000 viewers on Fox Sports 1 for its inaugural race (the top-rated eSports telecast on the channel thetime)

**Examples:**

SM Liiga 'Telia Esports Series' (EA NHL 2020)

Team Ineos 'eRide & eRace' with Zwift

**9: Look Forward To The Return Of Live Sport**

Amidst the tragedy, the struggle and the challenge there is a role to play for marketers to help fans stay positive and passionate about live sport, to remind them of what it is that they love and to lay the groundwork for its return by building buzz.

**Examples:**

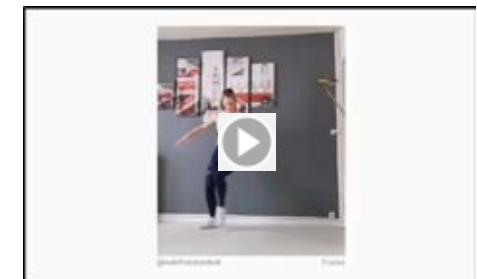
Adidas 'Ready For Sport'

Dick's Sporting Goods 'Long Live Sport'



NBC / IOC 'Everyday Athletes'

Buffalo Wild Wings 'Sports Lives On'



Team GB / Red Cross 'Isolation Games'

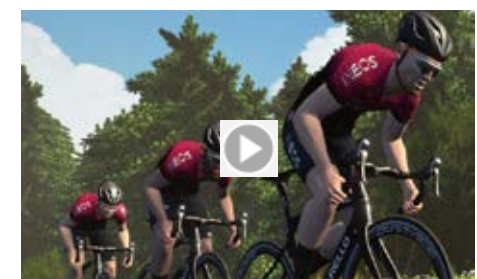
QBE / Sydney Swans 'Swans Story'



Asics 'Virtual Lab Shoe Launch'



SM Liiga / Telia / EA NHL 20 'eSports Series'



Team Ineos / Zwift 'eRide & eRace'



**READY  
FOR  
SPORT**



# Coronavirus Creative Tactics & COVID Cliches

## Logo Spacing:

From McDonald's arches in Brazil and Coke's giant Times Square billboard in New York to Manchester United clever reworking of its stadium sign to read 'NHS United', this was initially a touch of creative levity with a public, educational message, but soon became a marketing bandwagon under scrutiny for pointless crisis exploitation.

## Found Footage & UCG Montages:

Archive and social footage all that was available in the early days of lockdown and reflected the reality of the times. There was an avalanche of vertical, phone-shot montage spots from pretty much everyone - from the BBC and PG Tips to Nike's 'Play for the World' and 'Dick's' 'Long Live Sport'. Remotely available and editable, but does it stand out amidst the clutter?

## Repurposing Existing Content:

Reworking previous content, artwork, creative and copy with a timely fresh message - think BBC and Alan Partridge and Visa and the Olympics Games - was not just an economic tactic, but one which was possible and sometimes necessary considering previous investments. It can offer immediate cultural recognition, but it requires primo planners, professional photoshoppers, smart strategists and clever copywriters or it will look tired and lazy.

## In-House At-Home:

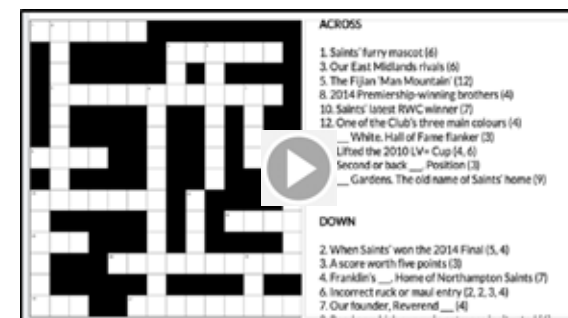
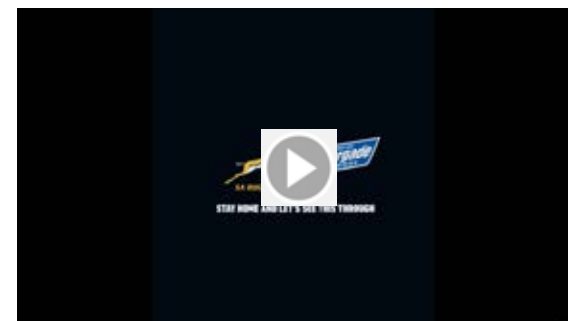
Promoting the benefits of staying at home and of the home itself - by shooting creative which would normally be outside from inside the home reflects reality and can offer ideas and inspiration - can provide a positive and practical message for some during lockdown. Burger King's 'Stay Home Of The Whopper' showed how to do it, as did NBC's #EverydayAthletes and NFL Draft 2020 presenting partner Lowe's with its 'Home Is What Unites Us'. But be careful because for many, such as those in self-isolation, in mourning, or trapped in tiny overcrowded claustrophobic spaces, home is a miserable and lonely place at the moment.

## Zoom Ads & Backgrounds:

This isn't just jumping on a trend, but genuinely leveraging the fact that video conferencing has become a staple of so many people's work/social life meant many brands were quick to create ads out of Zoom (think Tesco 'Food Love Stories' and Budweiser's reworked 'Whassup' spot for the NFL Draft with NBA stars Dwayne Wade and Chris Bosh). Plus there was the short-lived branded Zoom backgrounds craze to make at-home spaces seem smarter and more professional (eg Adult Swim, Yorkshire Tea and Dunkin'). This was relevant and fun, but how many do we need to see and does anyone really want a (dishonest/misleading) branded background? Ditto Microsoft Teams, Google Hangouts etc

## Digital Downloads & Print Outs:

Positioning marketing content and ads as lockdown activities to print out and colour/fill in is an old school classic that still works...sometimes. Ikea in Israel pulled it off, Adobe understandably dazzled, Aston Martin Red Bull Racing invited us to build our own F1 car (via Instagram) and we even liked the Northampton Saints RFC's crossword series. But there are plenty of professional produced non-branded colouring books around, so branded efforts really have to be great to make it worth getting the felt tip pens and crayons out.





## What Comes Next?

**Sports marketers now need to re-imagine the next normal and consider how to redesign marketing models, approaches and tools and get ready for what follows total lockdown and how to kick-off a turnaround.**

They will likely find themselves in a world that is somewhat different from the pre-Covid-19 period. But what will it look like - which behaviours will alter, which attitudes will shift permanently and what new technologies will have rooted themselves into fans' lives?

While some suggest life will never be the same, the likelihood is that eventually most things will go back to normal.

Eventually....

But in the medium term, the crisis will expose business model flaws for many sports rights-holders, sponsorship packages and broadcast deals and there are so many questions.

The pandemic is seeing companies to slash marketing spend and if rights-owners and brand sponsors can't show evidence of their direct value they will likely be axed.

Will non-exclusive rights become the new normal? Will short term tactical tie-ups replace long-term big money partnerships?

Will the COVID free-to-air linear TV comeback continue to blossom?

Will remote and scaled-down production become the new normal?

Will eSports takeover second-tier traditional sports? Will we see sports league and rights-holder consolidation (eg the PGA and the European Tour, or the ATP and WTA as per Roger Federer's tweeted suggestion)?

Where should sports marketers turn to in the next phase? Sponsorship X's recent 'COVID Impact Study' found that the majority of the industry expects to see the following areas of growth (whether for marketing, re-channelling sponsorship investment, or internal comms):

- +31% digital/social content
- +15% tech platform (eg Zoom)
- +12% virtual spaces (eg eSports)

Interestingly, despite the much discussed rise of eSports, only 17% of those surveyed have started testing out eSport due to COVID (with 68% still having no plans to start investing in eSport).

In terms of other post-COVID behavioural shifts, the European Sponsorship Association survey found that 70% of industry professionals expect greater consumption of digital, 50% believe there will be a higher appetite for live sports events and 35% think we will see an increase in grassroots participation.

Our own research and analysis suggests sports marketers should seek to retain and extend existing partnerships (as selling in this market will be extremely tough) and use the time and space to regroup, refocus and re-plan while they factor in the following trends and strategies.

### Don't Go Dark

In late April two of the world's bellwether marketers adopted opposing strategies: Coca-Cola said would temporarily pause marketing spend after limited effectiveness and reduced ROI, while the world's biggest advertiser P&G said it would forge ahead with marketing to 'retain mental availability' of its products.

So who should marketers look to for a lead?

Most studies show that brands which continue to advertise through a recession recover better than those that don't. For example, the Ehrenberg-Bass Institute cites a 2003 longitudinal analysis showing firms which increased marketing spend during a recession did slightly better than firms who only increased advertising spend during good economic times.

The benefit appears to lie in brands maintaining (or increasing) share of voice when competitors withdraw their advertising.

Most sports marketers should argue hard with their boards that they shouldn't go dark.

### Flexible Medium-Termism

In a crisis, most marketers focus only on near-term business results and adopt a stripped back survival strategy until the recovery phase. But as the COVID-19 lockdowns start to ease off there will be some relief, but it will not be over. There will not be a VE Day style or World Cup winning mass celebration.

The virus is likely to remain around and periodi-

**"Reimagine or adapt your rights and relationships to give audiences the joy and respite via their passions. New behaviours have been shaped, [but] people's passions haven't died. Create content and online engagements that either solve the entertainment void or compliment the evolving way sport will be delivered to audiences depending on how the virus unfolds. Engage with rights holders to establish opportunities and to temporarily modify rights so nobody feels short-changed. Team/player appearances, live in-stadium benefits and corporate engagement commitments will all need alternatives. Respond swiftly to constantly moving goalposts. Rights holders that are flexible, inventive and ready to go the extra mile are going to grow in stature and strengthen partner relationships."**

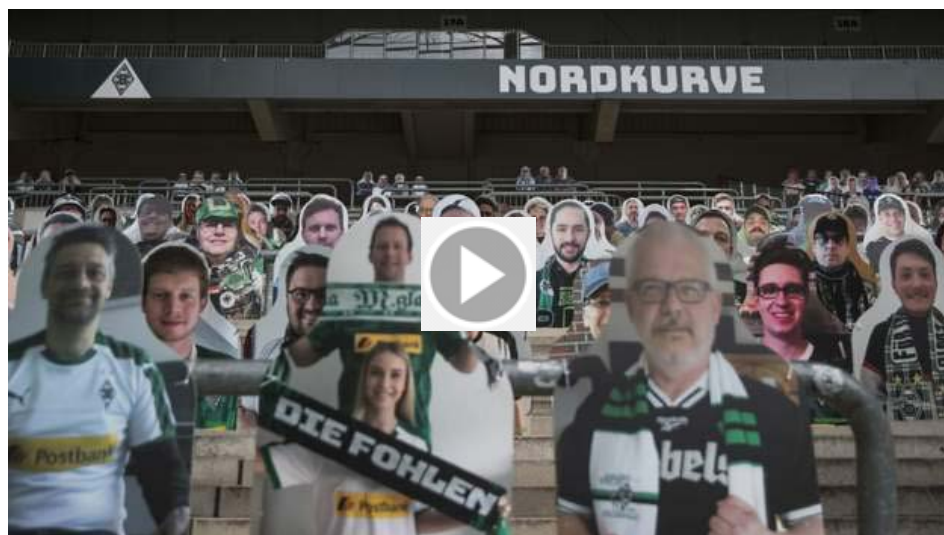
**Struan Campbell, Co-Founder, Levergy (M&C Saatchi Sport & Entertainment South Africa)**

ESPN / Marvel 'NFL Draft' (2020 Draft's 55m Audience Broke Previous Viewing Records)



**“Rights holders are rescheduling their calendars into tight windows which will lead to sports fixture congestion over the next 12 to 18 months. This will present commercial partners with an unprecedented creative challenge. Sponsors and their agencies will have to dream up even more inventive and original ideas to get audience attention to cut through all of the increased competition and clutter.”**

**Andy Sutherden, Head Of Brand Consulting, CAA**



Borussia Monchengladbach / FPMG 'Be There Still' (Puts Fan Doppelgangers Into The Stands)

**“Don't panic and try to do everything at once. Data suggests sports content on social channels is currently at 50% of pre COVID levels. If this suddenly goes to 150% when sport comes 'back', there will be a huge amount of wastage and lack of cut through. Planning a considered and long term phased return will be far more effective.”**

**Joel Seymour-Hyde, Managing Director UK, Octagon**

cally spike until there is a globally available vaccine. There might not even be a stable 'next normal' stage, but rather a constantly changing series of peaks and troughs and a cycle of associated temporary lockdowns and restrictions.

We don't know when final full recovery will come, or what it will look like, but when it does marketers need to be ready to address renewed demand.

Until then, in the medium term they will need to be flexible, adaptable, nimble and pragmatic.

#### Understand Fan Evolution

Sports marketers need to question almost everything they previously believed to be true and many of the answers lie in an ongoing, always-on understanding of changing customer motivations and behaviour.

How are consumer attitudes towards mass gatherings, travel and carbon usage, entertainment expenditure, investments and official institutions going to change?

How will fans adapt to remote support, in-person attendance, away travel, and wealthy sports stars?

With the future uncertain amidst of a generation-defining crisis, consumer behaviour looks likely to ebb and flow in the medium term before some changes become permanent in the long term.

For the medium term there is set to be constant change, so don't wait for a completely clear understanding of the future before acting but take a flexible, portfolio approach.

Marketing is the business function that understands the customer best, so make sure you do to keep the value of the profession high in the organisation.

And own your own consumer data.

#### Focus On Remote Fans (Less Experiential/More Digital)

Sports are obviously keen to return as soon as possible, but will only return when it is deemed relatively/acceptably safe to do so by relevant government and medical authorities. When they do, it seems certain that the first phase will happen behind closed doors.

Hosting sports without crowds poses a complex challenge not only for organisers and broadcasters, but also for marketers. Refocusing around remote fans will be key. After all, even when supporters are allowed back in the stadiums and arenas some may not do so until it is

'completely' safe. But this doesn't mean they don't care, won't engage or consumer.

Sports marketers must increase the focus beyond the direct fan experience and adapt promotions, content and sales channels accordingly. And they must do it fast. When the Bundesliga re-opens with empty stadiums in May all fans will now be remote fans.

There is an element of long-term evolution here too. For example, according to Kantar, Manchester United have 1.1bn fans around the world, but most will never have a chance to go to Old Trafford and the stadium only holds 76,000 anyway.

In the past, rights-holders have often devalued remote fans because they tend to contribute less to the bottom line than physical, in-person fans (they don't buy match tickets, food, drink, or merchandise from the club shop). But for the next months, they are the bottom line.

So identify, understand and focus on them and help your sponsors connect with them through new formats, approaches and new technology (possibly AR/VR, but definitely accessible tech with immediate impact).

#### Trackers, Apps & Safety, Security & Freedom

As societies emerge from lockdown and return to some form of semi-normal world, individuals and organisations will be looking for safety and security.

This will intensify the debate between safety and freedom and authority's power to increase the former whilst reducing the latter. In the US this issue has already seen armed protestors storm the steps of state capitals.

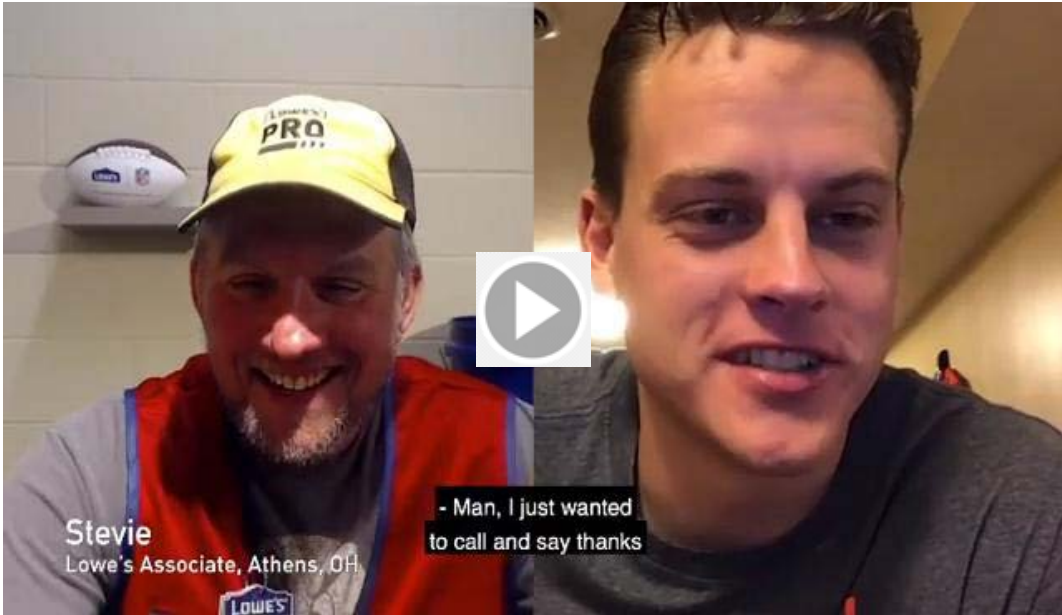
Sports brands may feel confident of staying out of this dispute, but will that be quite so easy for a sector largely based on mass gatherings and responsible for giant stadiums and packed out arenas?

One sub-sector of this subject linked to sport could be wearable tracker and mobile apps – tools which have become part of the sports space.

Nervousness and circumspection will remain (until there is a vaccine), so there will be a demand for and interest in portable safety tools and real-time information about their immediate environment.

Will sports organisations, brands and sponsors encourage the use of official government Covid-19 apps





Lowe's / NFL Draft Presenting Partner 'Joe Burrow Surprise Staff Video Thank You Calls' (Social)



Lowe's / NFL Draft Presenting Partner 'Christian McCaffrey Surprise Staff Video Thank You Calls' (Social)

Lowe's / NFL Draft Presenting Partner 'Home Unites Us' (TVC)



Lowe's / NFL Draft Presenting Partner 'Home Team' (TVC)



- such as the AFL's recent decision to publicly encourage fans to download to the Australian government's 'COVID-Safe' tracking app – or is this just too Big Brother?

Will sports-related tracker companies such as Fitbit add such features to their own devices as user utilities (perhaps even offering safer running routes or similar benefits) and might they use their expertise and data to contribute to national and international schemes?

### Consider Alternative Sports Properties

While a few sports are able to continue largely unaffected (think marble and drone racing) and others morph into alternative formats (like darts from home), sports marketers should consider backing alternative properties.

Non-live sports TV event sponsorships with alternative properties such as ESPN's 'The Last Dance' (partnered by State Farm, Reece's and Facebook) and the NFL Draft (activated by the likes of Lowe's, Bud Light and Oikos) have proved to be successful during lockdown.

The release of ESPN's 'The Last Dance' documentary series on the Michael Jordan era Chicago Bulls was brought forward to meet the needs of sports-starved fans and audience figures show it to have been a smash hit.

The first four episodes boast an average audience of 6m (Nielsen) making them four of the six most viewed programmes in the US amongst 18-to-34-year-olds since sport shut down in mid March.

Sports documentaries and behind-the-scenes series offer compelling content from a safe distance, can turn casual viewers into committed fans and don't have an expiration date so can be watched and rewatched. Plus they are cheaper than live sports or scripted formats.

The 2020 NFL Draft, despite axing its planned Vegas extravaganza (with 500,000 fans attending in person) for a virtual event from the commissioner's basement and the home offices of 32 general managers attracted blockbuster viewing numbers.

Broadcast on NFL Network, ESPN, ABC, ESPN Deportes and digital channels, the three-day event reached a record audience of more than 55m viewers (according to a league press release) and a 16% rise on 2019.

It's not just these pillar events and totemic shows that are attracting impressive numbers.

For example, the Milwaukee Brewers hit Zoom's 1000 maximum capacity for a virtual 'Happy Hour' fan

event which saw supporters dial in for a Q&A session with stars and executives on 23 April hosted by Brewers broadcaster Brian Anderson and sponsored by franchise beer partner Molson Coors.

While Borussia Dortmund's live-streamed 'Cyber Party' for fans in China - with content ranging from a user-generated juggling challenge, to a fan reporter vlog and a documentary on Dortmund's China office - incorporated 12 of the club's commercial partners and digital broadcaster PP Sports through ads, cross-platform promotion, jersey auctions, and branded content.

It was attended by 2.9 million fans, generated 1.2 million hashtag reads and at its peak attracted 110,000 livestream viewers.

### eSports & Gaming

And, of course, to add to the mix there is the accelerating rise of eSports.

With millions of Americans and Europeans quarantined at home, many have turned to their screens for entertainment. While traditional TV viewing has seen a comeback and streaming services are seeing impressive gains, gaming has exploded.

According to Verizon, US video game usage during peak hours has gone up 75% since quarantine started, with video streaming rising just 12% and social media usage remaining flat.

More time is now spent watching gaming videos and streams on YouTube and Twitch than watching HBO, Netflix, ESPN and Hulu combined.

It offers an escape and provides meaningful connections, plus it has become a new social currency and a cultural force.

Has COVID-19 seen gaming enter the major leagues? The answer is clearly 'yes'.

After all, 31% of US adults have playing video games in the last 30 days and it is already a \$139bn a year (and growing) business: making it is bigger than the NFL, NBA, MLB and the NHL combined.

Consider the \$30m prize pool for the 2019 'Dota 2: The International' was around three times larger than that of the Super Bowl or the Masters golf tournament.

It's not only sports-linked games that have seen successful sponsorship initiatives (such as Pizza Hut in NFL Madden, Coca-Cola in EA FIFA and Adidas in NHL 2020), but brands of almost every type have notched up stand-

**"The biggest challenge for sports marketers is winning the battle for attention. The focus must always be on contributing to the culture of the fans and rewarding them for their most precious gift – their time. Everything else is noise and wallpaper."**

**Misha Sher, Head Of Sport And Entertainment, MediaCom Worldwide**

Milwaukee Brewers 'Zoom Happy Hour' Maxed Out The Video Platform's 1000 Capacity



Borussia Dortmund's 'Live-streamed Cyber Party' For Chinese Fans Was Attended By 2.9m

**"Everybody is spending an inordinate amount of time planning for the 'return' of sport. But currently it is an exercise in second guessing scientists and politicians, compounded by every market being at a different stage in the crisis. Trying to forecast when sport returns, and in what version of its previous self (eg behind closed doors), is massively challenging, changes every day, and ultimately, mentally and emotionally fatiguing."**

**Joel Seymour-Hyde, Managing Director UK, Octagon**



out activated in the space. These range from FMCG and mainstream brands like KFC in Fortnite and luxury labels such as Louis Vuitton's bespoke branded travel case for the League of Legends World Championship trophy, to sportswear giant Nike's recent sponsorships of non-sports 'League of Legends' teams in China.

Consider an example from the music industry during the COVID-19 lockdown: 27m unique players attended Travis Scott's five Fortnite concerts between 23 and 25 April (the Thursday night show broke the game's record for concurrent players with 12.3).

So should other traditional sports marketers should consider shifting investment to gaming?

If so, the first task is to consider the target segment and mainstream sports professional shouldn't assume gamers fall into one homogenous young, male group based on outdated stereotypes), but rather need to consider platforms, game types and culture, playing times and motivations to play.

Be careful though, digital savvy gamers, whilst accepting of advertising and sponsorship in the space, can be unforgiving of the uninformed and the out-of-place.

### Final Thoughts

There are a few rules of thumb all sports marketers should consider while developing the strategic responses and planning next phase creative and campaigns.

While it is important not to take unnecessary risks, it is also vital to be part of the solution and not to add to the problems. Something Bundesliga and Premier League administrators, teams and players will be factoring in to decisions and plans around trying to finish their seasons.

There are no blanket solutions: different industries, sports and markets have different considerations and have had different COVID impacts - so act on a case-by-case basis

Even in the best case scenario in which a sense of sports normalcy returns in the autumn with new European football and NFL seasons, sports marketing budget normalcy won't return until at least 2021.

When normalcy does begin to return the sports landscape will be a cluttered as postponed events are rescheduled into crowded calendars, so it will be more vital than ever to give people a reason to care and to be creative and innovative. <

***"There is a unifying quality to sport that bonds players, athletes, supporters, coaches, referees, officials and the community at large. Our challenge is to remember this outside of lockdown and ensure there is purpose behind our work. Remember the extraordinary power of sport as a force for good."***

## **Rob Mitchell, Brand Lead - FA Competitions & Women's Football & Grassroots Football, The Football Association**





State Farm / ESPN 'The Last Dance Ad' (Docu-series Breaks ESPN & Netflix Viewer Records)



## What Comes Next? > Brain Food





## KEEP THE FAITH

It is extraordinarily challenging out there, but there remains an underpinning, compelling reason to keep the faith. Sports marketing is based on passion and passion will emerge from the crisis more powerful than ever. When the gates, the turnstiles and the terraces are finally open again, we will appreciate live sport that little bit more than before we'd ever heard of COVID-19.

# ACTIVATIVE

***Get the most ACTIVATIVE thinking 365 days a year***

**Subscribe to Activative for year round access to case studies, news and views focusing on sports marketing and sponsorship activation excellence, innovative and effectiveness**

**Activative brings daily inspiration and learning to your sports marketing / rights-holder / sponsorship team. Between our online intelligence tool, daily creative drops, weekly case study showcases, presentations, workshops and bespoke briefing reports, we connect the dots between game-changing creative activation, sponsorship objectives and real-world results.**

**Want a demonstration, presentation or more information?**

**Email us at [contact@activative.co.uk](mailto:contact@activative.co.uk)**

WWW.ACTIVATIVE.CO.UK



ACTIVATIVE